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AUTHOR Schmuck, Richard A.; Schmuck, Patricia A.

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ABSTRACT

Because of their visibility at the center stage of community life, small-town superintendents have a greater opportunity to act as participatory managers and instructional leaders. This paper reports the results of surveys with 25 small-town school superintendents to discover rural/urban differences, work patterns, and exemplary practices in instructional leadership. The prototypical superintendent was a white male in his early 50's with coaching experience, working in the same geographical region where he grew up, with nearly 30 years' experience in professional education. Superintendents' management styles differed, with some using collaborative, one-on-one, or laissez-faire methods. When asked to reflect on accomplishments in their current position, superintendents most often mentioned erecting or remodeling facilities, fiscal saving, initiating curriculum development, and hiring and firing personnel. Almost all were preoccupied with bonds, budgets, and buildings. Unlike urban administrators, small-town superintendents were not preoccupied with interpersonal conflict. Rural administrators have to be generalists to a greater degree than their urban counterparts. Exemplary practices include the following: (1) meeting with staff to uncover district problems; (2) making desegregation work; (3) using the management team; and (4) leading for school improvement. (DHP)

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BEING SUPERINTENDENT OF A SMALL-TOWN DISTRICT

BY

RICHARD SCHMUCK
and
PATRICIA SCHMUCK

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Being Superintendent of a Small-Town District

by

Richard Schmuck and Patricia Schmuck
University of Oregon Lewis and Clark College

Superintendents of small-town districts have to be adept at all trades. Like their urban counterparts, superintendents work with board policies, budgets, curricula, facilities, laws, and personnel, but they do much more than that. We saw them:

--accompanying board members on a tour of a steel mill,
--attending Kiwanis, Lions, and the Rotary,
--coaching the girl's junior-high basketball team,
--directing traffic as school lets out,
--drinking coffee downtown with the newspaper editor,
--driving a bus load of students out of town,
--eating pancakes and sausage at a church supper,
--meeting with a regional, special-education consortium,
--performing in a high-school musical, and
--picking up district mail at the post office.

They were involved in district work sometimes from 7:00 a.m. to midnight, from eating breakfast with hungry elementary students to bringing home tired secondary students from a basketball tournament after a one-way drive of 175 miles. Since many of them had only a secretary and an uncertificated business manager, they were, themselves, <u>the district</u>, picking up everything from the mail to a team without a coach. One superintendent talked sardonically about the job, "Superintendents of small school districts are a ridiculous catchall, mostly doing things that do not have to do with education. Fill pop machines, fill coffee machines, put the flag up, now radon, asbestos, Right to Know, and lead in the drinking water. All that's enough to drive you crazy. I've already gotten advertisements about radon. That's what drives me nuts. It's a year usually full of baloney."

A theme present in all districts was the centrality of the schools for the town's economic well being, entertainment, social support, and community cohesiveness. One superintendent put it this way, "This is a loving and caring community. They have deep interest in their children. The school is where it happens. We have 5,000 people in town and for our Christmas pageant we have 6,000 in the audience." Another superintendent told us, "In this town, school activities become bigger than life." Except for some long-term high school principals, the small-town superintendents, too, were "bigger than life". They were the most visible and important public figures in their towns.

The Study

On sabbatical from our Oregon-based training programs for school administrators, we set out on the day after New Year's, 1989, traveling 9,452 miles in 160 days to visit 25 small-town districts, randomly selected, in 21 states west of Ohio. We visited K-12 districts serving incorporated towns with between 480 and 2,000 students. Because the literature tends to highlight urban and suburban superintendents in the East, we wondered if superintendents in small towns of the West would see their role differently? For examples of research on superintendents, see Gross, Mason, and McEachern (1958), Carlson (1970), Cuban (1976, and 1988), and Blumberg (1985). Would superintendents in small-town districts invite more participation and collaboration from their administrators and teachers? Would they take an active role in curriculum? Is small really beautiful in American education?

We interviewed all 25 superintendents, each for over two hours, shadowed them for parts of three consecutive days and evenings, and observed them in formal meetings with the board or their principals. We also interviewed 84 principals, 119 teachers, and 28 board members, in part, about their superintendents. We sought to describe personal characteristics of superintendents, different patterns of work from their urban counterparts, and exemplary practices in participatory management and instructional leadership.

Personal Characteristics

The prototypical superintendent was a white male in his early 50's with coaching experience, working in the same geographical region where he grew up, with nearly 30 years experience in professional education, more than eight of which were as a superintendent in his current district. Indeed, all 25 were men, two of whom were Hispanic. Their mean age was 52 with a bell-shaped distribution ranging from 42 to 66. Only three had doctorates. Thirteen had been coaches. Twenty one were born in the same state in which they were currently working, and most of them were working less than 100 miles from where they grew up. While we were interviewing one superintendent, he pointed out of his office window to a couple of nearby houses and said, "My Granddad lived there, my Dad lived there, and I live there." The four superintendents who were from out of state had chosen to move West. The mean years of tenure in their current position was 8.6, but the distribution ranged from 2 to 24. Eighteen definitely were not planning to move, while 10 were actively planning to retire nearby. It was a decidedly <u>local</u> sample of superintendents.

Management Styles

From our observations and interviews in the schools, we sought to characterize the superintendents' management styles. We

categorized 11 as collaborative, i.e., worked comfortably in groups, fostered equality, and sought input and shared influence; 11 as one-on-one, i.e., eschewed groups in favor of meetings with individuals, fostered social hierarchy, and sought dominating influence; and 3 as laissez-faire, i.e., avoided group meetings, fostered autonomy, and sought to delegate. Whether superintendents were collaborative, one-on-one, or laissez-faire was unrelated to age, geographical region, and amount of graduate education.

All 11 collaborative superintendents used regularly, scheduled meetings with their principals, while only one of the one-on-one superintendents did. The other 13 called for meetings with the principals only "when the need arises." We found, too, that of the 12 who employed scheduled meetings, only 5 superintendents clearly demonstrated effective meetings' procedures, i.e., offered a clear and detailed agenda before the meeting, used group convening and communication skills, and assigned a recorder to summarize results of the meeting. For many of the superintendents we studied, a slogan on one of their desks was fitting, "The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been achieved."

Accomplishments

When asked to reflect on accomplishments in their current position about which they were proud, the superintendents most often mentioned: (1) Erecting or remodeling facilities, e.g., a well-appointed middle school named after the superintendent, a gymnasium that would bring more basketball tournaments to the town, and a new wing on an expanding elementary school; (2) fiscal saving and scrimping, e.g., a new school erected from budgetary savings instead of a bond issue, district funds invested at high rates of interest, and secretaries eliminated from the elementary schools; (3) initiating curriculum development, e.g., teacher committees launched to work on grade-level scope and sequence, curriculum consultants brought in from the state department, and a principal assigned the role of district-wide curriculum coordinator; and (4) hiring or firing personnel, e.g., over 200 miles traveled to recruit teachers, principals assisted in eliminating ineffective teachers, and the board and teachers' union brought together to hasten early retirement.

Almost all superintendents, except those in districts with substantial federal-impact funds, were preoccupied with bonds, budgets, and buildings because the economies of the majority of towns we visited had been weakened seriously during the 1980's. One superintendent, for example, had just issued pink slips to 13 teachers, four of whom had taught in the district for eight years, while another, who worked in a county with 30% unemployment, summed up what many other superintendents were thinking when he said that his greatest accomplishment had been "district survival."

Collaborative superintendents, more than the others, were

proud of having developed a strengthened management team, improved attitudes of students toward school, renewed trust between the board and teachers, enhanced staff involvement, and increased cooperation with neighboring districts. The one-on-one superintendents were proud of bringing success to athletics, making their staffs more accountable, and designing a new computer system for the district office.

Challenges

The superintendents went on to tell us that they would continue to be challenged by many of the same things they had accomplished, particularly by tight budgets during these hard times, by needed bonds that previously had been voted down, by continuous curriculum development and by the difficult personnel problem of hiring, transferring, and firing. At the same time, they posed some additional challenges for the 90's: (1) Responding to state mandates and reform reports, (2) raising student achievement scores, (3) wrestling with alcohol abuse among secondary students, (4) coping with asbestos, lead, and radon, and (5) helping their small, country schools to survive.

The collaborative superintendents, more than the others, continued to strive to improve the social climate of the district for both the educators and the students. One of the most articulate of them spoke about the need to reach out more to expand the K-12 focus of the district to include much more adult education, particularly education about parenting, as he said to "make the school for everybody." His view, however, was atypical.

What was typical were school issues that were not articulated by the superintendents we interviewed. Curriculum development, for instance, was emphasized by only three superintendents. In most districts there was no individual in charge of curriculum nor was there evidence of instructional leadership. Equal educational opportunity for minorities or girls, too, was not a salient issue for most superintendents, except in cases where there had been a recent discrimination case in the state. And, concerns about teachers participation in administrative problem solving was very rare.

Small-town superintendents are different from their urban and suburban counterparts on three distinct dimensions. First, the superintendents we met are not preoccupied with intergroup or interpersonal conflict as argued by Blumberg in, "The School Superintendent, Living With Conflict (1985) or by Cuban in, Urban School Chiefs Under Fire (1976). Second, superintendents in small towns must be generalists. Often they are the only professional educator in the central office and must be a jack of all trades. Finally, small-town superintendents are public figures. Although their public-relations strategies differ considerably from district to district, and some superintendents are more visible in the town

than others, they all play the most important single, public role in their small-towns.

Exemplary Practices

Of the exemplary practices we observed, four were outstanding:

(1) Surfacing district problems. Three times a year, this superintendent met with a district group to surface problems and to share perceptions and feelings. The group, known by the acronym TAB (Teachers Administrators Board), was made up of 8 teachers (2 from each school), 2 administrators, and 2 board members. Membership was rotated from year to year, which made it possible for all administrators and board members to serve over a three-year period.

The superintendent commenced each meeting by posing issues that had come to his attention, and went on to elicit other topics from the members. Meetings were self-consciously planned to be "open-bitch sessions", and were characterized by spirited exchanges and high involvement. The meeting just before our visit to the district was particularly engaging; it had started at 5:30 p.m., and lasted until midnight. Examples of issues for discussion were: (1) alcohol use among teenagers, (2) infrequent communication about curriculum between teachers at the two elementary schools, (3) slim offerings in vocational education, and (4) inaccurate communication between teachers at the junior high and high school.

Although, in our interview with the superintendent, he played down the TAB's effectiveness, it was the only example we found of a district-wide formal group, with regular meetings and rotating membership, which discussed cross-organizational problems outside of collective bargaining. One board member lauded the TAB, stating, "I enjoy it more than anything I do as a board member. We discuss everything openly with the teachers from potholes in the driveway to pay increases." The TAB, even if its group procedures were not always effective, was serving as a model to others for surfacing problems. For example, two of the district's principals were trying out a similar procedure in their schools, enlisting representatives from grade levels and subject-matter specialties to serve on advisory groups. Like the TAB, those school advisory groups met regularly, and rotated memberships from year to year.

Formal advisory groups which meet in an atmosphere of openness and acceptance can contribute to the problem-solving ability of a district or school. District problems are not disclosed to many superintendents, because they do not clearly state through their actions that they wish to learn about them. Indeed, we saw a number of districts in which the principals acted as insulators between the superintendents and the problems. Groups like the TAB, at least offer a legitimate opportunity for surfacing organizational problems with the boss.

(2) Making desegregation work. While in the South, we uncovered an exemplary practice facilitated by a superintendent of a generation ago, which was still having favorable effects today. The year before desegregation had to take place, by law, Black and White school administrators held discussions on how to make a smooth and effective transition. They convened meetings of parents and students from both the Black and White communities to discuss how the newly desegregated schools would operate.

Later, they brought together student leaders from the Black and White schools in summer workshops to prepare a student handbook for the desegregated high school. A Black principal of those days, now retired, told us, "We worked hard to get the Black and White power structures together. We were fortunate in having a superintendent and board, both of whom wished to pull together. Of course, the students had to be involved. Students had to determine what type of school they wanted, and the students had to know that there was no option. Integration would have to occur."

We found the district to be functioning effectively even today, with no "White flight", and with Blacks and Whites still feeling good about race relations in the schools. We thought how much power there can be in bringing students into the planned changes that a district might be undergoing, from new procedures for testing or teacher evaluation to new plans for a middle school or an alternative high school.

(3) Using the management team. The superintendent with a sign on his desk about the "illusion that communication has been achieved" was one of the few truly collaborative administrators in our sample. His experiences as a language-disorders' teacher, speech pathologist, director of compensatory education, and assistant superintendent had helped him develop a deep concern for clear communication, egalitarian relationships, and participatory management. After 4 years as superintendent, he was proud of having established a cohesive, nine-person management team, consisting of two assistant superintendents, the coordinator of special education, five principals, and himself.

In the room where the team met, every two weeks for three or four hours, we noticed newsprint paper taped to the walls with information from the team's work. There were piles of articles, papers, and journals on a large table in the center of the room around which all team members could sit face-to-face. Every administrative concern about the district appeared to be appropriate for team deliberation, e.g., implementing board policies, distributing lottery funds, facing difficult personnel problems, developing teacher schedules, and building collaborative negotiations with the teachers' union. Agenda items came from each member, and each member believed that the superintendent's meetings' procedures were effective.

The superintendent told us, "Participatory management has

always been a part of my background. I started it when I first got here, but it's taken four years to get it really going. First, I expressed my concern, over and over again, that I wanted all administrators to work as a team; second, I set up workshops, meetings, and procedures so we'd function like a team; and finally, after time, trust developed".

He added, "Right now, we are decentralizing decision making. The team just went through 200 items deciding who decides, what principals could decide on their own, or jointly and so on. We are trying to clarify for everyone just what school-based management means in a small district. We still have a long way to go."

(4) Leading for school improvement. One of only four Hispanic superintendents in his Southwest state, this charming superintendent exemplified many of the attributes of an instructional leader. Very visible to the students, teachers, principals, and an 85% Hispanic community, he seemed to be everywhere, from eating breakfast with students to directing traffic with the chief custodian at the end of the school day. During the school day he practiced "management by walking around"; with the limitless energy of a 42 year old (the youngest in our sample) who was in excellent condition, he was visible in the halls, the lunchroom, the classes, and on the athletic fields.

Upon becoming superintendent 10 years ago, he inherited what he called a mess. In his words, "the students were rude and undisciplined, the curriculum was old fashioned and not progressive, and the school did not belong to the community." He went on to say, "The old guard superintendent was too powerful; school did not belong to the community but to the superintendent. He was the expert and everyone respected him. He was the schools. I believe in local control and have worked to return the schools to the parents."

He set out to replace undisciplined students' behavior with school pride and student self esteem, an outmoded curriculum with one more up to date, and an apathetic and alienated community with a community-school program. Although, because of very poor economic conditions in the town, he faced an up-hill climb, it appeared that he was making significant progress in renewing the schools.

He had been putting a personal touch on most everything. Frequently smiling while in informal conversation with everyone who came along, he manifested respect and interest in others while maintaining humility and a sense of humor. He had visited homes and churches to encourage more parent participation in the schools. He had sought personal relationships with many students to give them a sense of pride in their school, their town, and themselves. He had empowered parents by giving them responsibilities in the schools, e.g., playground monitors, teacher aides, kitchen

assistants, and tutors for individual students. He had initiated a curriculum overhaul in the basic skills, still ongoing, by bringing the principals and teachers together through a curriculum needs assessment and by bringing in consultants to help teacher committees develop new curriculum. He had been meeting regularly with the administrators to solve problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The school is center stage of small-town life in America, and superintendents are the star actors. They are expected to do everything and to be everywhere. Some cope with the overload of tasks by zeroing in on budgets, facilities, and hiring or firing personnel, and by adopting one-on-one or laissez-faire management styles. Others, more concerned perhaps with the human side of school administration, tend to manage collaboratively, but unfortunately, they often only go through the motions of group work without using effective meetings' procedures or genuinely sharing influence. Some do cope with the overload, however, by effectively engaging principals, teachers, parents, and students in school improvement.

One superintendent described his collaborative management style in this way, "I like to get many people involved in management, but it's not easy. I work a lot through my principals, but when the decision is really important, I'll meet with all the staff in the morning so its good for discussion. The day when a superintendent was a dictator is gone. You cannot operate when folks are pulling all different ways. We need to all pull together. If teachers are not involved, they will say things downtown and that will have adverse effect in the community ..."

"A few years ago we had a funding crisis while we were in negotiation. We didn't know what our funding would be from the state. I met with all of the teachers to lay out the problems, and asked for a moratorium on negotiations. They did it. We were successful because of our cooperative climate. I think when you have an open line of communication, people cooperate even in an adversarial situation."

Four exemplary practices, in particular, offer ideal targets at which superintendents should aim. Superintendents can improve their roles as small-town educational leaders by: (1) Initiating formal procedures for helping groups of teachers, principals, and board members to surface concerns and solve problems together; (2) recognizing the wisdom of granting students influence, particularly as planned efforts at school improvement are being launched; (3) developing a cohesive management team which holds regular meetings with a clear agenda and effective communication skills; and (4) using the strengths of their own personality, while modeling caring, respect, and love of parents, students, and teachers, to motivate them for improved teaching and learning.

Because of their visibility at the center stage of community life, small-town superintendents have greater opportunity, if not responsibility, than their urban counterparts, to act as participatory managers and instructional leaders.

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